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October 20, 2004

Karen A. Holbrook
President, The Ohio State University
205 Bricker Hall
190 North Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210-1357

Dear President Holbrook:

I am writing today to ask you to suspend and investigate a particularly egregious use of hundreds of animals in Ohio State University's Spinal Cord Injury Techniques Course. I would also like to thank you for your response to my initial letter, which I received on September 20, 2004. Please allow me to respond to some of the points in that letter.

We recognize the importance of research to help patients with spinal cord injuries (SCI), and agree that the prevention of acute injury and the amelioration of chronic symptoms are top priorities. Hundreds of thousands of people are counting on the answers to these questions. This is why it is crucial to be sure that researchers are using the best possible research methods. Our concern is that, by offering this course, Ohio State University and the National Institutes of Health are limiting the paths that research scientists and graduate students can take.

The promise of research methods that focus on human biology, physiology, and injury pathology has not been fully realized, and it is urgent that more researchers are encouraged to pursue these areas. Spinal cord patients, neurologists, neurosurgeons, and neuroscientists alike all agree that the SCI field desperately needs to focus on translational and clinical research. The development and perfection of a human tissue SCI model is also needed. As many in the field know, the experimental animal models of SCI are lacking in their ability to parallel human SCI. Out of at least 22 therapies in the last few decades that have shown promise in helping some aspect of SCI, not one save methylprednisolone was ever proven effective at helping people. The effectiveness of methylprednisolone is now also being called into serious question. It is incumbent upon the scientific community to develop better and more humane models of SCI in humans.

There are also very serious issues regarding the humaneness of experimental spinal cord injury. The animals' injuries are, of course, very serious. Regarding the potential for a reduced number of animals that may be used for research in the future, it is perhaps more likely that the reverse will occur.

Needless to say, approval by an institutional animal care and use committee, in this case the ILACUC, provides little assurance to those of us familiar with their operations.

Alternatives are rarely truly investigated or recommended. In the case of the SCI Techniques Course, shadowing of researchers, modeling of techniques using simulators or other technology, or even viewing of videotaped procedures combined with surgical techniques instruction are clear alternatives.

My colleagues and I would like to meet with you to further discuss our concerns with the course and some of the alternatives we have identified. I would appreciate your prompt response. I can be reached at 202.686.2210, ext. 303 or by email at nbarnard@pcrm.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neal D. Barnard". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and "D".

Neal D. Barnard, M.D.
President